

THE FOCUS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

WHEN Joseph Mazzini was a boy of fifteen in Genoa, in 1820, a medieval reaction had taken over, in education as well as politics, and the youth who was to inspire Italy to unification and revolution could read little about social change except some old Girondist papers his father kept hidden from the police. He did, however, study Greek and Roman classics, which were, as a boyhood companion of his said, "the only thing taught us with any care at school." And these books, he found, were "little else than a constant libel upon monarchy and a panegyric upon the democratic form of government." So the young Italian patriot was nurtured by Cato and other ancient spokesmen for free institutions, obtaining a sound political education. He found living truth in schoolmasters who had lived two thousand years earlier.

Without meaning to minimize the genius of classical authors, it must be admitted that today, only a little over a century after Mazzini's time, we cannot read the ancients with the same inspiration. Something has happened, not simply to the focus of political issues, but to the focus of consciousness as well. There are still many regions, of course, where democracy does not prosper, and even in countries where the political revolution was accomplished in the eighteenth century the operations of self-government leave much to be desired; but the prongs of the creative spirit are no longer felt in political debate. One gets the feeling that we know these things, have known them for a long time, and should now be going on to something else.

But what? The thing to avoid, here, is too easy an answer. You get similar feelings when you read, say, Voltaire's *Candide*. This is by all accounts a notable book. It touches the nerve of common concerns in Voltaire's time. It is filled with the hypocrisy of princes, the folly of wars,

the determined ignorance of shallow philosophical optimism; but today, if one wants a depressing fable in which there are meanings which he can apply, he is more likely to turn to Franz Kafka. Even in relation to politics itself, the focus has changed. For living thought on political issues, Thoreau is now more fruitful than Thomas Paine.

But we want to know more than Thoreau can tell us. We want his intuitive assumptions explained. In *Civil Disobedience*, he wrote:

Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man? There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow-men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.

What, precisely, is Thoreau asking for? What kind of men? What kind of society? Are they possible? The problem becomes, not an argument about good and bad States, or the need to establish the one and abolish the other. We are not dealing with critical analysis, moral judgment, followed by political decision and action, but with questions of social and moral evolution. Theories of the Perfect State have no flesh on them. They have no more reality than the over-simplified Leibnizian "best of all possible worlds," which Voltaire exposed with such biting satire in *Candide*. Voltaire's opposite number, today, is

the University of California student who wrote the hundred-per-center's "credo"—

Americans Believe . . .

That behind every student voicing an unorthodox opinion there is a Communist agitator;

That a professor's value may be found by adding the number of the books he has written to his salary, then dividing by the number of pages in his FBI dossier;

That all immigrants come to America in search of liberty and that when they attempt to exercise it they should immediately be sent back

That freedom may be protected from abuse by taking it away

But after you have said this, what do you do? Join the Democratic Party? Suppose you already belong?

The thing that keeps eating at us, today, is not the need to distinguish good from evil in political terms, but the hunger to understand more about the substance and texture of human life. Parliamentary democracy is a kind of compromise solution for certain basic incompatibilities in human nature as it now exists, and the best solution the modern world has been able to devise, yet the complexities of an industrial, and now an automated society, plus the exigencies of nuclear militarism, have clogged the processes and diverted the vigor of democratic government. The compromise, while once both logical and practical, no longer works very well. Western observers, even radical observers of socialist persuasion, are reluctant to recognize this increasing failure of the democratic process, mainly because they have no idea of what to do about it. Short of anarchists who have no "practical" solution to offer, the only man on the contemporary scene who has been willing to discuss the shortcomings of parliamentary democracy in the present age is Jayaprakash Narayan, the Indian co-worker of Vinoba Bhave, and former leader of the Prakash Socialist Party. At this point, however, Mr. Narayan's contribution is mostly in terms of candid exposure and diagnosis.

Thoreau saw coming the kind of dilemma which faces modern man. It is not different, today; it is only more pronounced. In *Civil Disobedience*, first published in 1849, Thoreau wrote:

When a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves . . . I think it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. . . . This people must cease to hold slaves and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people.

In Thoreau's eyes, the provocations to civil disobedience were great enough to stir honest men to action, more than a century ago. And what are the provocations, today? Many summations of them could be put together, but the following, by Max Born, ought to be sufficient:

Modern means of mass destruction no longer deserve the name of weapons. They tend to regard men as vermin. On this lookout rest today's armament and strategic planning. I cannot think of anything more immoral or detestable.

After you read all the justifications for the use of these weapons, which are no longer weapons, but techniques of mass extermination, you willingly return to Thoreau for a further analysis:

I saw [he wrote] that the State was half-witted, that it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it, and pitied it. Thus the State never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. It is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength. I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion.

So, to bring the argument up to date, what of today's State; or rather, what of today's societies, the societies which long since have submitted to the total sovereignty of the State, in all matters where "survival" is in the least at issue? For this we need a modern writer, a man who has not failed to describe what has happened to these societies by reason of their identification of individual good with the good of the State. Albert

Camus said in his introduction to *The Rebel* (Vintage, 1956):

The purpose of this essay is once again to face the reality of the present, which is logical crime, and to examine meticulously the arguments by which it is justified; it is an attempt to understand the times in which we live. One might think that a period which, in a space of fifty years, uproots, enslaves or kills seventy million human beings should be condemned out of hand. But its culpability must be understood. In more ingenuous times, when the tyrant razed cities for his own greater glory, when the slave chained to the conqueror's chariot was dragged through the rejoicing streets, when enemies were thrown to the wild beasts in front of the assembled people the mind did not reel before such unabashed crimes, and judgment remained unclouded. But slave camps under the flag of freedom, massacres justified by philanthropy or by a taste for the superhuman, in one sense cripple judgment. On the day when crime dons the apparel of innocence—through a curious transposition peculiar to our times—it is innocence that is called upon to justify itself

We ought no longer to be able to hide from ourselves the fact that this is the correct analysis. And the next step of conclusion, that the political problem is no longer a political problem, but has turned into something else, must also be faced.

The difficulty, here, is that because we have for so long discussed public problems in nothing but political terms, we do not really know how to identify non-political issues. What, after all, are religion, education, science but political resources? Are we able to think of them as having autonomous value?

The naked fact is that we have moved the central concerns of human life away from the center and made them merely peripheral. Dolci put his finger on one of our major self-deceptions when he said: "To think that one can create life by destroying it is to transcend all the bounds of reality." This is a very simple thing to say, but how few are saying it! You might argue that only a people who have lost the capacity for genuine reverence could fail to agree with Dolci.

Of government, which has become the focal infection of our lives, Thoreau had this to say:

. . . this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. *It* does not keep the country free. *It* does not settle the West. *It* does not educate. The character inherent in American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient the governed are most let alone by it.

It must be admitted that thus far we have been skirting the issue. We still need to examine Thoreau's assumptions. For what these quotations do not tell us is why Thoreau *cared* about such matters. Thoreau, it happens, was an almost total deviant from the familiar American Way of Life. He had not the slightest interest in accumulating wealth. He wanted freedom to reflect, to read and to write—to feel and understand the natural world, to brood and invite his soul. As Robert B. Downs has put it:

His simple needs could be met without engaging in a life of drudgery, such as he observed his neighbors leading. Instead of the Biblical formula of six days of work and one day of rest, Thoreau preferred to reverse the ratios—devoting only the seventh day to labor. In short, everything he stood for was the antithesis of the teachings of Adam Smith, the maxims of Franklin's Poor Richard, and the traditional American ideals of hard work and quick riches.

The problem, then, is to find out what did interest Thoreau, and why it interested him; and then, what would be still better, to work up a theory and even a doctrine of the legitimate life-concerns of a normal, healthy human being, as a basis for returning to Thoreau's sort of thinking about the individual.

This is where we stand, today.

A project of this sort is going to take some time. In the first place, we have practically no vocabulary for such an undertaking. Further, this is not the sort of thinking that one man can do for

a lot of other people. Ideas about the nature and importance of individuality have of necessity to be as eclectic as possible. There is probably some kind of "rate" of progress in a development of this general character which cannot be exceeded, culturally speaking. For its beginning we have no doubt needed all the diversity of the existentialists, the Zen cult's substratum of philosophic inspiration and integrity, the craziness of the Beatniks' nonconformist revolt, the soul-searching of several sociologically inclined psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, the declaration of intellectual independence of the self psychologists, the abandonment of conventional political means of the peace-walkers all over the world, the rebel verses of Kenneth Patchen, the groping quest for identity on the part of certain novelists, and the slashing sanity of such writers as Lewis Mumford and Paul Goodman. In these numerous and multiplying elements of original thinking are the germs of a new view of man. Here, like seeds beneath the snow, are potentialities of perception which, in another half century, as their implications develop and grow together, could unfold a regenerated scene for human life. Something more will have to be added, of course; some lucid synthesis will have to come, but these tendencies are already far more than the bare bones of anarchist doctrine.

The change will be confronted by massive obstacles. There is the obsessing question of "survival." It will be difficult for those who can think of little else—not even of what it is, beyond the body and the senses, that is to survive—to begin to redefine the State in Thoreau's terms, and to recognize that government is only an "expedient," instead of being the climactic embodiment of human achievement. For this to happen, there will first have to be full-bodied yearnings and resolves upon ends toward which the State can contribute nothing except to "get out of the way."

But we have had great prophets of this view—Thoreau, Tolstoy, and Gandhi. The State,

said Thoreau, is "half-witted," armed with neither wit nor honesty, but only "superior physical strength." And Tolstoy:

If only men would boldly and clearly speak out the truth that has already been revealed to them of the brotherhood of all nations and the criminality of exclusive devotion to one's own nation, the dead, false, public opinion upon which all the power of Governments and all the evil produced by them rests would drop off of itself like dried skin, and make way for the new, living public opinion which only waits that dropping off of the old husk that has confined it in order to assert its claims openly and with authority, and to establish new forms of life that are in harmony with the consciences of men.

And Gandhi:

The State represents violence in a concentrated and organized form. The individual has a soul, but as the State is a soulless machine, it can never be weaned from violence, to which it owes its very existence.

These were men with great things to do, to which the State and even the practical instruments of government were irrelevant—or at most mere expedients. What we might be able to gain if we were to saturate ourselves with the ideas of Tolstoy, Thoreau, and Gandhi, is an emotional realization of the values felt by these men. Then we could *see* government in the role of an expedient and *know* that it ought never have been allowed to become anything more.

People get what they desire in their hearts. If their freedom is only an abstraction to them, that is what they will get for freedom—an abstract idea, a slogan, a paper right and a ritual fulfillment. But when they come to *have things to do* with their freedom—things of importance for the doing of which the freedoms and the rights are themselves expedients—then the inventiveness of determined human beings will discover ways of making a suitable government that will know how to get out of the way of the doing of those things.

This is the project for today and tomorrow: Finding what is really worth doing, and scaling all our other needs to this paramount aim.

REVIEW

PHOENIX AS XENOPHON

ACCORDING to record and legend, Xenophon (430-355 B.C.) was a remarkable general. In his *Anabasis*, relating the "March of the Ten Thousand" against the Persian tyrant Artaxerxes, Xenophon tells us he began the march with the Greek troops as a private citizen: he had no military status. When the Greeks learned from their leader Cyrus the true object of the expedition and the true strength of the Persians, however, they stopped marching. Many were reluctant to go on; some deserted immediately; most decided to continue, whatever the odds. In the first major battle Cyrus himself was killed, the Asian mercenaries fled, and the surviving Greeks fell into wild confusion. Their confusion increased when the Persian commander-in-chief, presumably ready to negotiate for peace, lured all the Greek generals into his quarters and had them seized and beheaded. At this point Xenophon came forward. He induced the remaining officers back in camp to reorganize the Greek force and take measures for its safe retreat. He took command of the rear—the most dangerous post. By his advice on the choice of route, as well as his resourcefulness and the example of his personal courage, he held the Greek force together. Eventually he enabled it, after severe hardships and heavy fighting in the mountains of Armenia, to reach the Aegean coast, go on to Byzantium, and rejoin a larger Spartan force against the Persians.

Xenophon's career as a general gives us a parallel to D. H. Lawrence's career as a novelist. Lawrence, of course, was more than a novelist (poet, painter, short story writer, social prophet), just as Xenophon was more than a general (agricultural economist, horse-trainer, political historian, memorialist of Socrates). Lawrence was, in fact, the temperamental and artistic embodiment of his chosen emblem, the Phoenix—the fabulous Arabian bird that builds its nest of spicy twigs, sings its poignant dirge, flaps its wings to set fire to the nest, and burns itself to ashes only to rise to new life. Yet it is as a novelist that Lawrence devoted his greatest creative energy, fought his hardest battles for recognition, and achieved his highest art. And it is as a novelist that

the parallel with Xenophon holds. Both men could say they were drawn into what they achieved, not trained for it; both felt besieged but nevertheless "took command of the rear"; both succeeded as much through courage and a "deaf ear" to prevailing opinion as through talent, resourcefulness, and luck; and both could say at the end (though perhaps Lawrence was far from feeling it), "Look, we have come through!"

Phoenix as Xenophon . . . this is the interpretation of Lawrence as novelist which emerges from Eliseo Vivas' *D. H. Lawrence: The Failure and the Triumph of Art* (Northwestern University Press, \$4.75). One of the best-known and most provocative philosophers in America today, Vivas, performs here a labor of love and some necessary surgery in arriving at a reasoned appraisal of Lawrence's work. Considering the range of insight and breadth of interpretation, his plan of organization seems itself a triumph. His preface excludes clearly what the study does *not* deal with—namely, with Lawrence's poetry, the bulk of his stories and short novels, and his first two full-length novels, *The White Peacock* (1911) and *The Trespasser* (1912), which Vivas dismisses as "the work of a talented beginner" and having only "biographical interest." But his preface also gives us what so few prefaces do nowadays: an indication of the writer's bias regarding his subject, and an account of the critical method.

In "The Two Lawrences," his introductory chapter, Vivas makes an assumption fundamental to both his interpretation and appraisal of Lawrence:

. . . a writer's importance cannot be judged exclusively by his influence on other writers. When we consider the changes that have taken place between the year 1911 (when Lawrence's first novel appeared) and the present, it seems that this is as much Lawrence's century as that of any other writer of the period. For he was one of the writers who helped give form to the sensibility we now possess and who helped define the values and concerns that are the substance of our lives. If it is true, as Ezra Pound put it, that artists are the antennae of the race, we can say of Lawrence that early in our century he thrust his long, tremulous filaments into the future

and brought back to us a report of what we were gradually to find there as the years went by.

In the same chapter, Vivas disclaims any intention of producing or supporting a "literary psychoanalysis" of Lawrence. Since "the essential task is that of examining Lawrence's art and not his sick soul, the latter is of objective importance only when it becomes the source of traits discernible in the work itself. . . . What is of undisputed importance is the work itself." But, admits Vivas, the critical complexities involved in locating "the work itself," in separating it from the mass of biography-cum-fiction that constitutes the Lawrence canon, are fascinating but stupefying. Here, even those of us who are neither professional critics nor aestheticians will agree. Lawrence is pre-eminently an artist who makes great demands on his audience. Though these demands are not of the same order as those made, say, by Joyce or Stravinsky, they rise incessant as the Phoenix for any reader of Lawrence: they rise, they remain with us, they cannot for long be ignored. Perhaps the nature of these demands, testifying to great artistic power mixed with (not superimposed on) great human weakness, prompted Vivas to subtitle his study *The Failure and the Triumph of Art*. Certainly the body of his study justifies the sub-title. It also justifies the critical assumptions operating throughout:

The first and the most difficult problem that the critic of Lawrence has to face is that of distinguishing in his work poetry from prophecy, art from message; of distinguishing aesthetic vision authentically revealed from propaganda, of distinguishing the world he discovered in and through the act of creation from his criticism and his turgid lucubrations. The created world will be found at its best to be a powerful aesthetic organization of values and disvalues, the matter of experience as grasped by a gifted mind and transmuted and informed by it. What the poet gives us is what he brings up from the depths of his creative imagination, in the ideal isolation of his perfected form and informed substance. True, the matter the poet works with is the stuff of his experience of life and of art; but if he is an artist, the act of creation *adds* to his experienced matter to make up a literally new product: the informed substance of his poetry. The addition makes this product more than an imitation or reflection of what exists, it is literally an

addition, the manifestation of the freedom of his spirit.

When we reflect on these assumptions, isolated their context, and then turn to the body of the study, we can see them being tested, extended, exemplified. In the first section "The Failure of Art" Vivas scrutinizes, in both discursive and analytic terms, four novels: *Aaron's Rod* (1922), *Kangaroo* (1923), *The Plumed Serpent* (1925), and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). Each of these novels, he finds, fails in several significant ways as a created world, a "powerful aesthetic organization of values and disvalues."

Aaron's Rod, for example, Vivas judges "the worst of Lawrence's novels" on five counts. It never rises above "a thoroughly prosaic account of the events that led Aaron, after leaving his wife and children, to go to London and, after an illness in London, to Italy." It is filled with "technical clumsiness and flat writing." It fails "to elucidate an important point in which the reader is legitimately interested, the grounds on which Aaron leaves his wife and children." It is "radically incoherent" in *form*; a picaresque narrative, it is "made up of a series of incidents whose only unity is the thin thread imparted to it by Aaron's presence." It is also "radically incoherent" in substance; its human relationships are obscured or slanted by Lawrence's one-sided presentation of Aaron. *Kangaroo* fails for similar reasons and because, in spite of some memorable bits of dialogue, it constantly threatens to turn into "a travel book" such as *Sea and Sardinia* (1921). (It is characteristic of Vivas that he does not consider *Mornings in Mexico* and *Etruscan Places*, both published in 1927, as mere "travel books.")

The Plumed Serpent, second to *Lady Chatterley* as Lawrence's most controversial novel, Vivas dismisses mainly because its proposed revival of Aztec blood-rites and ithyphalic gods never emerges as an aesthetic whole. He recognizes that Lawrence the propagandist—the social prophet, the ideologist of the Id—seriously intended a "column of blood" religion as a panacea for most if not all of our present discontents. Vivas' dismissal, however, comes at the end of the most knowledgeable and enlightening interpretation of *The Plumed Serpent* that this

reviewer has read. As for *Lady Chatterley* itself, Vivas runs counter to the current consensus in judging it one of Lawrence's lesser achievements. He concedes that it does not have the "aesthetic blemishes" found in the three novels just discussed; in this sense, it "appears to be, on a superficial glance, a well-made novel." Yet, on more careful scrutiny, it fails in two ways: not only are large portions of the narrative message-laden (one of Lawrence's purposes here being to teach his readers "the proper attitude towards sex"), but, once again, Lawrence gives a one-sided, unfair presentation of a character—in this case, Clifford Chatterley. Vivas shows in detail how this one-sided presentation destroys the novel's organic unity, how it makes the novel "fall apart into two stories whose relationship has been bungled":

The reason for the split of the novel into two stories is not one about which the student of Lawrence's life and character need cavil in prolonged perplexity. Lawrence hated the Cliffords of the world so bitterly, so implacably, that when he could get at them, he forgot every other objective, he forgot his central cause, his fight or labor for the phallic consciousness, as he put it, and he took off after the objects of his hatred until he cornered them and tore their living souls out of them. The reasons for his hatred leave room for differences of opinion. As to the fact itself there is none; the evidence we could gather even from his novels alone is irrefragable.

Vivas concludes this section of his study with "Lawrence Imitates Lawrence"—a chapter showing how, throughout Lawrence's fiction, we "find characters that are imitations of older, previously presented characters." Even devotees of Lawrence would admit that these "imitations" abound and that they point to certain obsessive concerns in Lawrence's life. What is so interesting about Vivas' discussion of them, however, is that he demonstrates how such concerns often weaken a novel, deflect the reader's interest, or destroy the referential value of the symbolism.

In the second section, "The Triumph of Art," Vivas employs his critical method on what he takes to be the high points of Lawrence's achievement: *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *The Rainbow* (1915), and *Women in Love* (1920). These, Vivas finds

Lawrence's three best novels and among the best novels written in English during the first half of this century. This is high praise. As criticism, however, it has no value unless the critic can show *in the works themselves* the grounds for his appraisal. He must show us that these works are worth his admiration and ours not only for their negative virtues, the common blunders and blind-spots they are free from, but also for their positive values: their various and rewarding claims to our attention as aesthetic wholes existing in their own right. Vivas shows us. He demonstrates, through a sensitive analysis of human interrelationships and moral insights, how these three novels alone would justify us in ranking Lawrence among the major artists of our time. His discussion of the Birkin-Ursula and Gerald-Gudrum love affairs in *Women in Love*, for example, exhibits the marvelous many-dimensional awareness which Lawrence could bring to bear on a created world.

At the end of *D. H. Lawrence: The Failure and the Triumph of Art*, when we remember that Vivas has all along been testing a critical method and a philosophy of art on Lawrence the novelist; when we realize how well all three have come through the test; and when we consider how rare until recent years any reasoned appraisals, any detailed appreciation, of Lawrence's novels have been, we may want to shout—Viva, Vivas! And we may want to shout long life to Lawrence, too, for the *Dictionary of National Biography* is in error: Lawrence did not die in 1930. As thousands of readers the globe over can tell you, Xenophon still takes command of the rear, the Phoenix flames, and Lawrence is very much alive.

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COMMENTARY
"SONS AND LOVERS"

THIS week's review of Vivas' Lawrence book makes us remember the film version of *Sons and Lovers* we saw two or three months ago. Now, looking back to the twenties—when we first read this book—we recall most of all the intensities of the young man's longings. Since the book finishes nothing, settles nothing, you conclude that it is the burning honesty of its author's search for meaning which captures the reader. The film—which seems faithful enough to the story—confirms this impression.

Lawrence rebelled against the moral conventions of his time. One suspects that if the conventions had been otherwise—had represented slack and self-indulgent behavior instead of brutalizing repression—he would still have revolted, but in some other direction. There is this about the authentic artist: he cannot stand insincere conformity and moralizing pretense. He wants unmediated human expression and he will have it at any cost. One wonders, then, what Lawrence would have written about if he had lived in a society of honest, natural human beings—if he had not been obligated by his environment to "react" against what he felt to be so false and unnatural in the people around him.

The sad thing about *Sons and Lovers*—what seems sad, now, looking back on it—is the impossibility of fulfillment for its leading character. He wanted something which did not exist or could not be found where he sought it. This may do Lawrence an injustice, but it is the impression which hangs on, from the reading of so many years ago.

The film, incidentally, is a good one. It is magnificently cast. In one sense, the story is a vista into a bit of socio-moral history. It shows the hungers of the human heart wrestling with a particular set of conventions, with strong appetites, and displays the tragedy of people unschooled in high human ends, yet with the

strength and the passion that might have achieved them.

Lawrence struck down a false truth of the spirit and tried to replace it with a physiological intuition. The iconoclasm was no doubt needed, but the new deity he established had stature from his act of rebellion. Physical love, after all, comes naturally enough. It is not something people must struggle and sacrifice for. Only in a mixed-up culture can such virtues attach to the normal instincts of the body. They are something given, not achieved.

We shall remember Lawrence, not for his improvised religion of the body, but for his awareness of the heartbreak in human beings, and the compassion in his art.

CHILDREN

. . . and Ourselves

ON RELIGION AND MORALITY

RELIGIOUS institutions traditionally claim to be the custodians of morality. Along with Gordon Allport (see *The Individual and His Religion*), we feel that this claim is more easily disputed than supported. But conventional religion and morality are related in one obvious manner—confusion about religion encourages confusion in ethical and moral standards.

We have been waiting for some time for a place to use a piquant quotation from Truman Capote's story, "Children on Their Birthdays." The "Miss Bobbit" of the following paragraph is an eight-year-old who thinks for herself, and has evolved a sophisticated way of looking at the religion of her elders. *She* is not confused; she insists on manipulating religious symbols in a manner that seems to make sense:

It was shortly afterwards that Miss Bobbit paid us a call. She came on Sunday and I was there alone, the family having gone to church. "The odors of a church are so offensive," she said, leaning forward and with her hands folded primly before her. "I don't want you to think I'm a heathen, Mr. C.; I've had enough experience to know that there is a God and that there is a Devil. But the way to tame the Devil is not to go down there to church and listen to what a sinful mean fool he is. No, love the Devil like you do Jesus: because he is a powerful man, and will do you a good turn if he knows you trust him. He has frequently done me good turns, like at dancing school in Memphis. . . . I always called in the Devil to help me get the biggest part in our annual show. That is common sense; you see, I knew Jesus wouldn't have any truck with dancing. Now, as a matter of fact, I have called in the Devil just recently. He is the only one who can help me get out of this town. Not that I live here, not exactly. I think always about somewhere else, somewhere else where everything is dancing, like people dancing in the streets, and everything is pretty, like children on their birthdays. My precious papa said I live in the sky, but if he'd lived more in the sky he'd be rich like he wanted to be. The trouble with my papa was he did not love the Devil, he let the Devil love him.

It so happens that "Miss Bobbit" is the most ethical person in the story, and after reading Mr. Capote, one's instinct to applaud any youngster's honest naughtiness is reinforced. We are reminded of a little English girl who, according to W. Macneille Dixon, queried, "But if I *have* to go to heaven, may I sometimes have a little devil up for tea?" Both "Miss Bobbit" and the little English girl are expressing something of the constructive spirit often found in iconoclasm—and the interesting part about iconoclasm is that the purest forms of Western Christianity, which merged with elements of Greek philosophy, were definitely iconoclastic.

Prof. Gabriel Vahanian, of Syracuse University, contributed an article titled "Christianity's Lost Iconoclasm," to the *Nation* for April 22, in which he points out that Christianity once challenged the individual as "a debunking of man's natural inclination to deify himself, or his society, or the state, or his culture." But when a certain emperor of Rome appropriated those elements of the Christian tradition which he could utilize in affairs of state, religion became first conservative, then reactionary—seldom, if ever, constructively iconoclastic. Prof. Vahanian writes:

The history of religion is the history of spiritual degeneration. Wherever evidence exists, it tends to support this view, despite the fact that one would not hesitate at all to agree with the anthropologist or the cultural historian that religious beliefs have on the whole become less and less barbaric and that religious practices and institutions have become more and more civilizing as well as civilized. Whatever one wishes to say about religion from any other angle, the least that can and must be done from this particular point of view is to define religion as man's attempt to cover up his sense of shame. The Swiss Pestalozzi and, today, the theologian Wilhelm Vischer have already said this. But what they have left unsaid is the direct relation between this shame, spiritual degeneration and iconoclasm. Religion degenerates into a sense of shame as soon as it ceases to be iconoclastic. Whether this statement can be made about all religions is beyond our present scope. Certainly, it applies at least to the Christian tradition, and is relevant to an understanding of the failure of

nerve characteristic of the contemporary religious climate. This failure is derived primarily from the fact that Christianity has forfeited its iconoclastic responsibility, and consequently other movements, other ideologies have assumed—one might say usurped—this function.

Prof. Vahanian concludes with a few sentences which suggest that a child's attendance at "Sunday School" may tend to move him into an ethical vacuum rather than an environment that will foster the ethical sense:

Every religion degenerates when it discredits its god. And now as then the mood is one of longing, such longing as is quenched only by an iconoclastic wind of the spirit. More and more evidently, Christianity is no longer moved by it; and our culture is expropriating Christianity. The Protestant churches—most of which owe their origins to social or ethnic differences—find it difficult to surmount the animosities of their ethnolatrous clannishness. And the Catholics still wait for the Protestants to return and submit to Rome. A truly iconoclastic move would consist in the Protestant Churches' abdicating their individual infallibilities and in the Catholic Church's abdicating its papal infallibility. But such an iconoclastic move would demand too much boldness from our comfortable, self-righteous and degenerate religiosities.

A parallel study was recently undertaken at Michigan State University under the auspices of the American Orthopsychiatrist Association. A group of Vietnamese youngsters—reared in Buddhism—were asked to fill out a questionnaire which had been previously employed for fourth and fifth-grade Michigan youngsters. The Buddhist children felt secure in terms of a morality which accorded respect for parents and their religious values. The Michigan children were not concerned with being dutiful or "good," perhaps because they were in no way sure that they could believe in the definitions of "goodness" which had come to them from adult patterns. The source of happiness, according to the Michiganers, was to be located in the possessions of various material belongings: "If my father would only buy me pretty presents, I would be satisfied." . . . "I could be perfectly happy if I could have . . ., or if I could

get . . ." something material, such as a swimming pool.

The New York *Times* for April 9 reported a conference in Greenwich, Conn., between a group of teen-agers and a psychiatrist, an anthropologist and a minister on the subject of "moral standards." A conventional Christian background had not, for the overwhelming majority of the conferees resulted in a sense of security regarding ethical standards. Here are two of the teen-age comments as reported by the *Times*:

(1) We wonder about an absolute morality derived from an absolute source, in God. Does this mean conformity in morality?

(2) Communication between parents and children is not good. This is no fairy-tale world. Let there be an honest exchange of problems. We need help, not just to be told what to do. We deserve credit for decisions we make.

Our moral standards must come from within us. No one can tell us. You must determine yourself what is right and wrong.

So, we agree with Prof. Vahanian that constructive iconoclasm is a necessary part of a living religion.

FRONTIERS

The Machine Isn't Flawless

SOME day someone is going to do a study of the American taxpayer and it is fairly easy to predict that the findings will reveal him to be inordinately generous where the rich and powerful are concerned and mean and suspicious in regard to the less fortunate. At least, this is what one would imagine if his self-appointed spokesmen are to be believed, or if we take seriously the letters to the papers that are signed *Taxpayer*.

One who reads the popular press cannot help but notice the screams of outrage that ensue when a few relief clients are caught in a small bit of larceny, while an apparently approving silence follows the admission that a couple of billion for defense have been utterly wasted. When a group of huge electrical companies band together to take the country for a possible half billion, there is almost jocular admiration, but if someone with only three hundred dollars left in the bank is caught using a public hospital without charge, indignation knows no bounds.

As outrageous as it may seem, this sentiment doubtless governs the social thinking of a large segment of our citizenry. It's probably an archaic survival from the puritanical belief that failure should somehow be punished and that success should be rewarded. In church, years ago, one used to hear sermons to the effect that the rich and successful had been given a special stewardship by the Lord and that the poor had wasted the Lord's substance. If you weren't down-and-out poor, you could identify with the rich and bask in their righteousness. In the same way, these days, the poor can never be in a state of grace so far as capitalistic ideology is concerned; they and those who would help them are instigators of creeping socialism.

The contradictions and paradoxes that arise from such thinking would be ludicrous were it not for the fact that human lives and suffering are involved. That a Texas millionaire should be

virtually bribed with the gift of public money, in the form of tax reductions, to explore for oil and then be protected from the hazard of loss by depreciation allowances, while an honest, elderly citizen who has helped develop the country lives on an inadequate pension, grudgingly given, and without decent medical care, should shock every citizen of the land. But it doesn't. Tax deductions for the industrial advertising budget that supports a TV series goreifying the old West adds to the average taxpayer's burden without causing him to whimper, but if an equal amount of money were spent to give a few thousand old Westerners decent medical and hospital care, there would be a political shoot-out.

Parole officers don't spend as much time in checking up on their criminal clients as social workers do in checking the finances of old-age pensioners in order to make sure that they aren't getting a dollar or two more than the law says they deserve. To get into a county hospital it is entirely possible that your last breath will be used in taking the pauper's oath. If discharged while still disabled, you may be given a bed in a skidrow flop house and allowed two meals a day in a fifth-rate restaurant. These are things you don't read about in the paper.

Actually, the average American taxpayer would deplore the very situation he creates, if he knew about it. But he never knows about it until he, himself, or a friend or relative, gets caught in the trap he has helped to create, and then it is too late to protest. Such media of communication as once carried exposes of intolerable situations no longer exist. Responsible editors feel that they can't show the bad side of capitalism to the world. Oddly enough, those who have the most to lose if our system were discredited do the most to make it vulnerable. It is their propaganda against what they choose to call the Welfare State and creeping socialism that creates potentially explosive situations.

As an example, there are at least two million, and probably twice that number, of men and

women between the ages of fifty and sixty-five who are unemployed or leading marginal existences on jobs that provide little more than room and board. Most of them have drawn their last unemployment check and will not again have the sort of employment where they can draw another. Since they contact no agencies they are not listed among the unemployed and few are able to contribute markedly to their Social Security accounts. They have no hospital insurance or money for medical emergencies. Their chances of earning decent wages at the jobs they can do are cut by the fact that many of these jobs are filled by Social Security pensioners who are allowed to earn a hundred dollars a month in addition to their pension and who are sometimes willing to go to work on a full-time job at that wage.

The people in this group have, as they say, been swept under the carpet. They have no organization or spokesman; they are socially invisible. If, however, they do discover their common plight they could be a potent political factor. And if their existence were well known they would act as a powerful storm warning for those who have not yet reached fifty and whose jobs or businesses aren't too secure. Automation, centralization, and small business failures add to their roll daily. These people live in a continual depression in the midst of what we lovingly call unparalleled prosperity. Yet all of them were once protesting taxpayers.

It is doubtful that any country practices self-deception to the degree ours does. Our natural optimism doesn't allow for such massive flaws in the nature of *things as they should be*. The greatest superstition of our industrial democracy is that a dollar of public funds spent on human welfare is somehow immoral and will create sloth. This superstition is probably based on the idea that to admit that there can be human need within the structure of our system is an admission of failure. Hide or deny the need and you have success—the sort of success we have now.

Pre-retirement unemployment is the reason so many people reach the age of sixty-five without any resources, and it should be remembered that during their productive career these same people went through eight years of a major depression. If an enemy power had done to them what their own economic system did to them, they would be awarded an indemnity, especially since they went without all but the barest living while they helped to restore the country's economic balance and forced such social gains as Social Security and unemployment insurance to shore up the tottering structure.

Today we talk wistfully of "national goals" and silently berate ourselves because we have none. The fact is that we deny ourselves a goal by accepting as a fact that our industrial democracy is a well-oiled and flawless machine such as the world has never known before. If we accept the fact that the machine isn't flawless, but possibly can be improved, in this case by finding some way of salvaging and supporting the human waste it casts off noiselessly and so indifferently, then we have at least established a short-term goal and will be worthy of setting ourselves up as an example to the free world. By considering the human element of our culture as something else than a tax drain, even if at the expense of an electric can opener and a supersonic broiler, we may be nurturing a little national maturity.

There is of course another way of looking at these matters, for which we are probably not ready at all. If you adopt this view, you readily admit the weaknesses of the Welfare State; you acknowledge that the tendencies which its critics identify and castigate are real; but you go on to point out that the goals of the Acquisitive Society inevitably exaggerate economic inequities which seem to turn up wherever large numbers of human beings pursue their fortunes in association, and that under the increasingly rigid conditions imposed by the patterns of technology, ordinary resourcefulness no longer serves the individual as it did in the simpler agrarian communities of the

past. Eventually, the most successful individuals in the technological society turn out to be the people who are sophisticated enough to adapt to the complicated distortions of human life which have become "normal" in this society. This sort of development mixes everything up and makes the calculation of value almost impossible, except at some spuriously simple level.

A time will come when it will no longer be possible to deny that the chief products of the Acquisitive Society are mechanical and human obsolescence, morally aimless lives spent in pursuit of trivial ends, an amazing variety of techniques of deception, numerous experts at pitching and pandering, and inconceivably frightful skills in the professions of killing and destruction.

At this point, men of intelligence will see the necessity of overhauling, not the mechanisms we have evolved for the distribution of wealth, but the philosophy of the good life which caused those mechanisms to develop as they did. It is then that the principles and practice of men like Gandhi and Danilo Dolci will begin to make sense even for "practical" people. Meanwhile, we shall have to make do with economic and social thinking which is at least susceptible to the dictates of sagacious compromise.